Lafayette Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

P.O. Box 133, Lafayette, California 94549

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Editors: Shirley Thomson (284-2995), Sue Cross (284-9594)

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Lafayette Historical Society needs more volunteers!

The present corps of volunteers is being stretched to the limit because of changes in the school program and a series of special events the Society's Board of Directors would like to do between now and 1998.

1) Starting this year, third-grade students are to study California history--including Lafayette history-- and this year's fourth-grade students are the last to study California history. There fore we will be conducting tours for twice the number of students in 1994 as in the past. We have been looking into ways to streamline our presentations and ways to be heard above the noise of our busy streets. Those interested should contact Collette Means at 284-4617.

2) Our archivist, Irma Somerton, has received permission to work on the LHS files in the library during library closures. She is now working up a plan for a filing system to be used in the future. Very soon, then, she would like to have some work parties to put the files in order. If you are interested in helping, please contact Irma at ~~284-2294~~ 284-9785.

3) Special Celebrations:

a) In 1894 the building for the Wayside Inn was built, so on May 15, 1994 we will celebrate its hundredth anniversary. This will be done in conjunction with the present owner, the Assistance League of Diablo Valley. Nancy Flood (283-3409) is working on this project and needs help.

b) How about a house tour in 1995? Diddo Clark (283-2803 or 939-3592) is planning one. She also needs the help of a good committee. Give her a call!

c) The year 1998 should also see a big event. At that time the Society plans to celebrate the150th anniversary of the settlement in the Lafayette area by Elam Brown and members of his family. This event should have wide community support and include a parade and extensive after-parade activities, including historical exhibits. If this interests you, please contact me at 283-3908.

It appears that May 1994 will be a very busy month for the society. The walking tours will be winding up that month, we will mark the Wayside Inn's centennial, and our annual meeting will take place on Tuesday evening, May 10. The Civil War Re-encactment group will provide speakers at the May 10 meeting who will represent the points of view of both the damn yankees and the rebels. (One of Lafayette's connections to the Civil War is the anvil that was broken celebrating the end of the war. The anvil now resides in the Lafayette Library.)

Sincerely,

Bill.

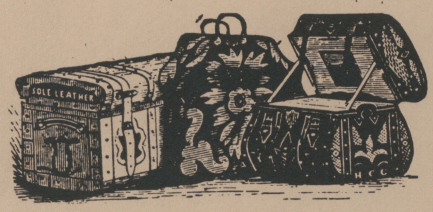
William Wakeman

1993-94 Officers and Committee Chairs

President	Bill Wakeman
Vice President	Marechal Duncan
Treasurer	Sheila Piriano
Recording Secretary	Ruth Dyer
Corresponding Secretary	Oliver Hamlin
Annual Potluck Dinner	Richard Johnson, Oliver Hamlin
Archives	Irma Somerton
Book Sales	Ruth Dyer
Fire Engine	George Wasson
Historical displays	Bill and Irma Somerton
Landmarks	??
Membership	Oliver Hamlin
Oral History	Ray Peters, Marechal Duncan,George Wasson, Nancy Flood
Newsletter Editors	Shirley Thomson, Sue Cross
Newsletter Mailing	Frances Hunt, Ruby Sturman
Program	??
Publicity	Diddo Clark
Walking Tours	Collette Means

DUES

Student membership	$2.50
Family membership	10.00
Business membership	50.00
Life membership	100.00



Historical Society Annual Board Meeting will be May 10th... Put in on your calendar!

Upcoming Events of Interest

March 24: Orinda Historical Society Spri General Meeting. The speaker will be Bill Wakeman, the program being " The History of Lafayette".

May 10: Civil ~~Was~~ War Re-enactment program at Lafayette Historical Society annual meeting and potluck dinner: 6:00 p.m., Veterans Hall, Lafayette.

MAIL FROM FARAWAY PLACES...

Corresponding Secretary Ollie Hamlin reports receipt of a letter from Istanbul with a genealogy query—already in process of follow-up—regarding a local Lafayette family.

May Potluck Dinner and Program Meeting set for Tuesday, May 10

-Civil War Re-enactment will be the focus of the May 10 meeting.

-Mark your calendar now to meet at 6 p.m. at Veterans Hall.

-Dinner and a vivid presentation by "Civil War Soldiers" will follow.

DOCENTS NEEDED FOR LAFAYETTE WALKING TOURS

Walking Tours Chair, Collette Means, is in urgent need of help for the upcoming spring walks for our school children.

In April and May Lafayette Historical Society hosts historical walking tours of the downtown area and the Lafayette cemetery. All fourth-grade students in the Lafayette School District take part. This year docents are needed to conduct tours for these enthusiastic youngsters.

If you enjoy the company of children and wish to share your love of local history, please call Collette Means at 284-4617.

Editor's note: The following text is taken from a delightful talk on early Lafayette history by Mrs. Jennie Bickerstaff Rosenberg presented to members of the Contra Costa Historical Society at a meeting in Lafayette in May 1956. She begins with Elam Brown, but there's much here beyond that early part of the story. Mrs. Rosenberg's vivid images evoke a fresh view of the people, the dusty roads, and the old ways of a little country community she had known for seventy-seven years of its hundred in existence.

Mrs. Rosenberg's Irish-born father, James Bickerstaff, paid eighty-four dollars in gold coin to Elam Brown on June 7, 1879, for property on the south side of the present-day Mt. Diablo Boulevard at the site of Diablo Foods. At that time, then, the Bickerstaff family was actually living outside Lafayette. Jennie was born in 1871 or 1872 in Pennsylvania; she began school in Lafayette in August 1879. She would become a teacher and one of Lafayette's leading citizens.

"EARLY LAFAYETTE HISTORY"
by Jennie Bickerstaff Rosenberg

I think we can begin with only one person and that is Elam Brown. Elam Brown was born in New York. His father and mother went to Massachusetts while he was quite young. They moved to Ohio when he was seven years old and later moved farther west. When he was eighteen, his father died and he took over the care of the family until he was twenty-one. At that time there was a great deal of excitement about the West; so many people were interested in planning for their future, better homes, new country, new ranches, and so Elam Brown wanted to go West.

He married Sarah Adams and then began farming in Illinois where he cleared one hundred eighty acres. He lost his wife and in 1846 Mr. Brown determined to emigrate to the Pacific Coast. He therefore formed a company from the residents who were living near him and they began making preparations for the long journey acrosss the plains. Together with fourteen families and sixteen wagons, on May 1, 1846, they crossed the Missouri River and started on their trip across the plains, with Elam Brown as captain. On the way they had many difficulties. One time their cattle stampeded on account of buffalo and 120 head were lost. This was a great loss, but they went on and fortunately were able to buy more cattle along the way to draw the wagons. Sickness was also prevalent and at one time half the company was down. They were six months on the trip across the plains. Here is a lantern which Elam Brown gave my father and which was used during their night stops on the long journey. [Now displayed in Lafayette Library.]

Finally the company reached Sutter's Fort. But the next question was where to locate. It was decided to go on to the Santa Clara valley and all were happy to be at their journey's end. But there was more trouble, for Sanchez, the Spanish bandit, was creating a reign of terror. Finally he was conquered and the company of settlers divided—some going to Monterey, others to Santa Cruz, San Jose, and Elam Brown going to the redwoods in Contra Costa County.

Here in 1847 Elam Brown spent the summer, whip-sawing lumber which he hauled to the San Antonio Creek and then took (married) Mrs. Margaret Allen Brown (and) eleven (children), so they had quite a family.

The same year, 1847, Elam Brown heard that William A. Leidesdorff had a ranch for sale which he had purchased from a Spaniard by the name of Valencia. Mr. Leidesdorff agreed to sell the Rancho Acalanes to Elam Brown. The rancho, consisting of 3,328 9/10 acres, was bought for $900, which money Mrs. Brown had brought across the plains in an eight-day clock.

I shall try to give the locations of the boundaries: Looking toward the east, just beyond the Lafayette Park Theatre, we can imagine a line running north and south. This is the eastern boundry of Rancho Acalanes. Continue north about half way up the hills, then turn west and continue through Happy Valley until you come in line with the foot of Charles Hill and *then continue south* until you are in line with the Lafayette Reservoir. Turn east and the south boundary of the rancho passes through the reservoir and continues until it meets the first line running north and south.

In 1848 Elam Brown settled in Lafayette. There are different stories about just where he first settled. One location given was an old adobe which was on Roy Bunker's place in Happy Valley. I still remember the old adobe ruins. Later with the help of his family, a house of redwood lumber was built on a lot on what is now the west side of Hough Street [now Lafayette Circle] about one block south of Mt. Diablo. At the present time the Emporium and Fabric Store are located there [Petar's Restaurant in 1994].

Here is a picture of Elam Brown as I knew him. He looks cross but he wasn't; he was a very kind man. We called him Grandfather Brown, so when I say Grandfather Brown, I mean no relation, but just a very kind way of recognizing Elam Brown. His wife we called Grandma Brown.

One day mother and I went to call on Grandma Brown. I was seven years old and I was knitting a wristlet. Grandma Brown was so pleased to see that I, such a little girl, was knitting this wristlet that she gave me her knitting needles, which I still have. They were all very kind, friendly people.

In 1853 Elam Brown built a flour mill near the present site of the Park Theatre. Before the mill was built it was necessary to go to San Jose to get the wheat made into flour and the round trip took a week. I still remember seeing the old mill and I wish I could tell you more about it.

We are very thankful to the Lions Club for finding one of the stones that ground the grain behind where Peter Thomson's blacksmith shop had been located. I had known of the stone for a long time and had spoken to different people about it and had hoped that it would be put in the plaza sometime. It remained for the Lions Club to get the stone and place it in the park. The plaque on the stone reads: "The Pioneer Settlement in 1853, The grist mill of which this stone was a part,

was erected beside the creek south of this plaza. Elam Brown, owner of the mill came here in 1846 to make Lafayette the first settlement in Contra Costta County. Erected by Lafayette Lions Club. August 13,1955." (Error: The Pioneer Settlement in 1853 should have been 1848, because that is when Elam Brown settled here.) Now let us give the Lions a hand because they did it. I think it is wonderful that we have this relic of the old mill and I should like to say once more that the mill was built in 1853

Now I must explain that in some of the school books it say: "In 1857 William Hendrick purchased a tract of land from Mr. Loucks of Pacheco and on it erected a dwelling house and a flour mill. This mill was the only flour mill ever operated in Contra Cost County." We are very grateful to the Lions Club for bringing this piece of the old mill to us and it is where we may see it for a long time to come.

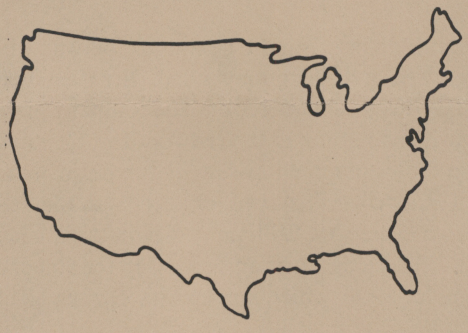
Perhaps I might speak of the early location of the town of Lafayette. It was down on what we now call Golden Gate Way, a short distance beyond the Park Theatre. You will find some of the old Locust trees still standing there. They are a part of the old settlement of early Lafayette. A church [Good Templars Hall] was also built there and later, around 1886-87, the old pioneer church building in Lafayette was moved from its original location on Golden Gate Way to a new site on land donated by Elam Brown. Location of the site was just east of the present First Western Bank [in 1994, site of Union Station east of Plaza Park] on Mt. Diablo Boulevard.

I have here a picture of the old school house and this picture shows a group of Lafayette young people. The building was not in use as a school at this time but was used as a place where young people could have a little fun. In the doorway stands Will Hough with his violin and the young people have come out to have their pictures taken. This is a picture of the first school house in Lafayette.

Benjamin Shreve came to Lafayette in 1852. During the winters of 1853 and 1854 he taught school. The people were very anxious to have a school. I believe there were twelve children at that time. In 1855 he started a store which was later moved to its present location across from the plaza and is now the Toy Store. The present Pioneer Store on Golden Gate Way is not the old Pioneer Store.

Mr. Shreve, who as I said, taught school, was the first school teacher in Lafayette. He also named our town La Fayette after the French General. In 1857 he petitioned Congress to have a post office in Lafayette.

I would like to tell you something about the store as I remember it. I was just a little girl then and I went to school in the second school house which was behind the Lafayette Methodist Church. When we went home from school we would always go along by the creek which was near the store and see what had been thrown out from the store. There was always something very interesting; little boxes, bright colored papers or some other things that were very wonderful to us at that time. Then we would go on to the store and pick up the mail. As you went into the store on the right hand side was first a showcase with thread, needles, ribbons and all kinds of things for sewing. The ribbons were beautiful and one day my mother gave me some money so that I could buy a small piece of each kind for the crazy quilt which I was making. On the shelves were some pieces of cloth and calico and things like that. Farther down on the same side of the store there might be a couple of hoes or pitch forks, a scythe, parts of harness and several horse collars.



On the other side of the store there were mail boxes for the mail and in the show case there was Star tobacco, pipes, etc. Besides, there were some nice little boxes of popcorn-cracker jack, you know-and the boxes had prizes in them! Sometimes there would be a ring which made your finger green when worn, but that made no difference, it still was beautiful. Then farther back in the store was coffee, teas, sugar, flour, crackers, molasses, etc.

Weekday mornings, the stage came from Walnut Creek, bringing mail to Lafayette, picking up the outgoing mail and perhaps, if there were passengers, continuing on to Oakland with the mail. In the afternoon the stage returned to Lafayette bringing the mail and perhaps some passengers.

On the way for the mail, we often saw Grandfather Brown coming from his house for the mail, walking slowly and leaning heavily on his cane. He was an old man by then, but was interested in all that was going on.

Horace Shreve, in a column written in *the Knave* wrote: "My grandfather, Benjamin Shreve, died in Lafayette in 1890. My father, Milton Shreve continued operating the store and ranch property until 1898, at which time he disposed of the properties and moved to Oakland."

The second school house was built back of the present Methodist Church. This was later moved over to Mt. Diablo Boulevard and was used as a post office, library and telephone operating unit. Later the building was sold and at present it is the "Shillalah Cafe" [currently, Killarney House].

We had three hotels: the first one was built on the corner of Moraga Road and Mt. Diablo Boulevard by Milo Hough in 1853. This burned, I was told, and the second one, which I still remember, was built on the same location by Philip Lamp and this also burned down.

We had another very interesting man in our community, Peter Thomson, who came here from Canada. He had learned the blacksmith's trade and as a journeyman, spent four years at his trade. He came to Lafayette and worked in a blacksmith shop which in later years became his own.

I can remember Mr. Thomson very well, not only as a blacksmith but also as one of the members of the Methodist Church when the building stood on a hillside east of the plaza. In cold weather he made a fire in a little old stove in the rear of the building and in stormy weather he would sit and wait for the minister and the few members who formed the congregation. If the storm was too bad, he would wait until he felt sure that the minister would not come and then he returned to his home. For years he was superintendent of the Sunday school. (To be continued...)